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## Noise as Abstraction: Enhancing the Poetic

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Abstraction in its resistance to evident meaning has the capacity to interrupt or at least provide tools with which to question an overly compliant reception of the information to which we are subject. It does so by highlighting a latency or potentiality inherent in materiality that points to the possibility of a critical resistance to this ceaseless flow of sound/image/data. This resistance has been remarked on in differing ways by a number of commentators such as Lyotard, in his exploration of the avant-garde and the sublime for example.

This paper will initially map the collaborative project by Daniel Mafe and Andrew Brown, *Affecting Interference* which conjoins painting with digital sound into a single, large scale, immersive exhibition/installation. The work acts as an interstitial point between contrasting approaches to abstraction: the visual and aural, the digital and analogue. The paper will then explore the ramifications of this through the examination of abstraction as 'noise', that is as that raw inassimilable materiality, within which lays the creative possibility to forge and embrace the as-yet-unthought and almost-forgotten. It does so by establishing a space for a more poetic and slower paced critical engagement for the viewing and receiving of information or data. This slowing of perception through the suspension of easy recognition runs counter to our current 'high performance' culture, and its requisite demand for speedy assimilation of content, representing instead the poetic encounter with a potentiality or latency inherent in the nameless particularity of that which is.

**Keywords:** noise, abstraction, materiality, art, sound

### Introduction

This paper maps the collaborative project *Affecting Interference* by Daniel Mafe and Andrew Brown, which conjoins painting with digital sound into a single, large scale, immersive exhibition/installation. The work acts as an interstitial point between contrasting approaches/media to abstraction: the visual and aural, the analogue and digital.

To begin with, however, the paper will explore the ramifications of noise as abstraction, that is as that raw inassimilable materiality, within which is established the creative possibility of forging and embracing the 'as-yet-unthought and almost-forgotten'. It does so by establishing a space for a more poetic and slower paced critical engagement for the viewing and receiving of information or data. This slowing of perception through the suspension of easy recognition runs counter to our current 'high performance' culture, and its

requisite demand for speedy assimilation of content, representing instead the poetic encounter with a potentiality or latency inherent in the nameless particularity of that which is.

Noise and abstraction might superficially be construed as opposites, as tools of opacity and clarity, respectively. For example in information theory, noise is considered to be unwanted, meaningless, and irreducible; noise results when something 'does not work perfectly' (Imre & Janos 2011, xvi). But even though our use of noise creates an abstraction that may veil the informational content, all is not as it seems. While noise can be a source of interference in informational processes, either analog or digital, it can also serve to enhance perceptual clarity; as in the case of dithering in audio signals or anti-aliasing of fonts. Noise can also be seen as providing aesthetic interest; richly textured materials seem to get noisier as one examines them more closely, such as a grain in wood or the sound of the bow drawn gently across the violin string.

In our current work we are exploring, and in this paper we wish to draw attention to an emerging understanding of abstraction present in artistic works as that which resist immediate interpretation. This is not an abstraction characterised by reduction but instead one of potentiality, not an abstraction that summarises but one that affords creative interpretations. In particular we focus on the use of noise as a technique of abstraction, as a mode of flattening or simplifying that simultaneously masks and entices. In particular, we are interested in the ability of noise as abstraction to influence perception, to paradoxically entice through superficially obscuring; an effect that activates the action in perception, and the desire to make sense.

In addition, within our audio-visual practice there is both an interference and abstraction in the relation between the visual and sonic. They disrupt, inform and combine. They complicate yet cohere.

## **Noise**

In the 20th century, artistic communities embraced both abstraction and noise as new opportunities. Noise was first embraced by the futurists in visual arts and later in the sonic arts as a space of new timbral possibility in genres as diverse as the distorted guitar sounds of Jimi Hendrix in the 1960s, the stochastic processes of Iannis Xenakis and explorations of tape degradation by Alvin Lucier in the 1970s, noise-based synthetic drum sounds of the 1980s, the glitch music of the 1990s as embraced by artists on the Warp Label including Autechre, and 'noise' as a named genre to describe artists such as Merzbow. Within the visual arts it could be shown how abstraction drew attention to the material nature of paint, the nature of the picture plane and the operation of a painting as an object in space. For example, in the first instance, the gestures of Jackson Pollock were definitively paint drips and splatters for the new audiences of abstraction.

Further to this artistic direction we suggest that noise can function as abstraction, as a mode of interference that can act to enhance engagement by being resistant to meaning and obscuring clarity and detail. Abstraction acts as a filter to perception, like the noise of a cassette tape draws the listener into the

musical work as they seek to hear past the noise and to focus on the signal.

While these perceptual qualities may have been present in many noisy media, including the highly textured drawing surfaces of rock art or low resolution digital audio signals, the deliberate use of noise as abstraction has particular cultural resonance in the high definition world of the 21st century, in a world of vector graphics, computer displays of more than 300 dpi, wave field synthesis, and massively multi-speaker projection systems. Even beyond the arts and the materiality of media, noise as abstraction can be seen to function in the flood of information and data that can threaten to overwhelm us; a condition only likely to become more prevalent as the pipes that deliver information expand exponentially. The need for abstractions in the face of this onslaught are evident to many, evident, for example in the proliferation of data visualisations and sonifications. More in keeping with our notion of noise as abstraction might be ambient Twitter feeds that seem unintelligible in aggregate or at a distance, but are meaningful when engaged with at closer levels of detail. Attempts at abstraction of this kind are well underway; outside the fine arts these include data visualization and data mining techniques.

### **Abstraction**

Abstraction, in its resistance to evident meaning, has the capacity to interrupt or at least provide tools with which to question an overly compliant reception of the information to which we are subject. But before tackling how this occurs we need to look at just what kind of abstraction this paper is considering. The notion of abstraction that works best in this context is one that is Deleuzian. Rajchman, in his article *Another View of Abstraction*, has pithily summed up this notion:

[I]n Deleuze one finds an abstraction concerned not with extracting 'information' from things...but rather with finding within things the delicate, complicated 'abstract' virtualities of other things. ...inherent in materials, it supposes the subsistence of connections which exceed the messages of a medium, and ourselves as senders and receivers of them. Thus the 'abstract' use of a medium is not when it itself becomes the message but when it starts to stammer 'and...and...and...' prior to message and transmission. (Rajchman 1995, 22)

This reading aligns with a post-formalist approach to and understanding of abstraction. From this perspective abstraction is seen as a strategy that opens out from an exclusively inward view to one also focused outwards, towards the becoming-world, towards potentiality itself. Ironically it is this opening out to potentiality that is mirrored as a form of latency or potentiality in the work itself. And it is this latency or potentiality inherent in abstraction and so in materiality that points to the possibility of a critical resistance to this ceaseless flow of sound/image/data. This resistance has been remarked on in differing ways by a number of commentators such as Jean-Francois Lyotard, in his exploration of the avant-garde and the sublime for example. Lyotard described the sublime as an understanding through which art and its associated practices resist easy assimilation as a consumer commodity. His thought represents an attempt to understand art both politically and philosophically by focusing on abstract painting's affect as a state of profound unknowing. To talk of the sublime in art is

to speak of the suspension of any comfortable certainty in being and instead to engage with the real as a limit to meaning and knowing. It is also to talk of it as the presentation of the unrepresentable that offers a momentary but significant break with representation. For Lyotard, avant-gardist art does this through an investigation of its own nature, a thorough philosophical interrogation and testing of its own formal and conceptual borders. Avant-gardism of this type often stands accused of producing purely solipsistic art but Lyotard reveals that, instead, it generates a site of resistance through the slowing down or rupturing of habitual patterns of perception. Lyotard goes one step further and claims that this,

...is more a matter of an irreversible deviation in the destination of art, a deviation affecting all the valencies of the artistic condition. The artist attempts combinations allowing the event...The art-object ...tries to present the fact that there is an unrepresentable. (1991, 101)

It has also been well articulated by the critic/curator Jan Verwoert in an article he wrote on the abstract painter Tomma Abts. For Verwoert

*abstraction* is the opposite of *information*. ...True abstraction creates a singular experience of suspended meaning, the exhilarating sensation of the horizon of perception opening up and the mind reeling as new ways to see, think, and feel become tangible. By virtue of its singularity, this experience of abstraction interrupts the circulation of data. It creates a momentary release from the cycle of reproduction and dissemination and takes you to a different place where you see things, for an instant, in and for themselves: singular, particular, irreplaceable, and un-exchangeable. (2008, 92)

These comments on Deleuze and by Lyotard and Verwoert highlight how our response to abstraction is changing. Abstraction is now a space of resistance to and interference with, the seemingly unmediated flow of information to which we are now exposed.

### **Affecting Interference**

To walk into the exhibition *Affecting Interference* is to be confronted in the first instance with what looks to all intents and purposes [as?] a pure painting show. But after the briefest moment of immersion one hears noise, an organization of scratching, pulsing, droning abstract sounds emerging from speakers hanging over each painting and from additional speakers vibrating the floor beneath your feet. The speakers are small and lo-fi and no attempt is made to disguise or camouflage them with or into the paintings. What does this range of interactions add up to? How do they perform as an ensemble?

This collaborative project by Daniel Mafe and Andrew Brown—one of a number that they have been involved in together—conjoins painting and digital sound into a single, large scale, immersive exhibition/installation. The work as a whole acts as an interstitial point between contrasting approaches to abstraction: the visual and aural, the digital and analogue are pushed into an alliance and each works to alter perceptions of the other. For example, the paintings no longer mutely sit on the wall to be stared into or at. The sound, seemingly emanating

from each work shifts the viewer's typical visual perception and engages their aural sensibilities. This seems to make one more aware of the objects as objects—the surface of each piece is brought into scrutiny—and works to immerse or embed the viewer more viscerally within the exhibition. Similarly, the sonic experience is focused and concentrated spatially by each painted piece even as the exhibition is dispersed throughout the space. The sounds and images at first may appear to be similar in each local instance but this is in fact not the case, as closer attention will quickly show.

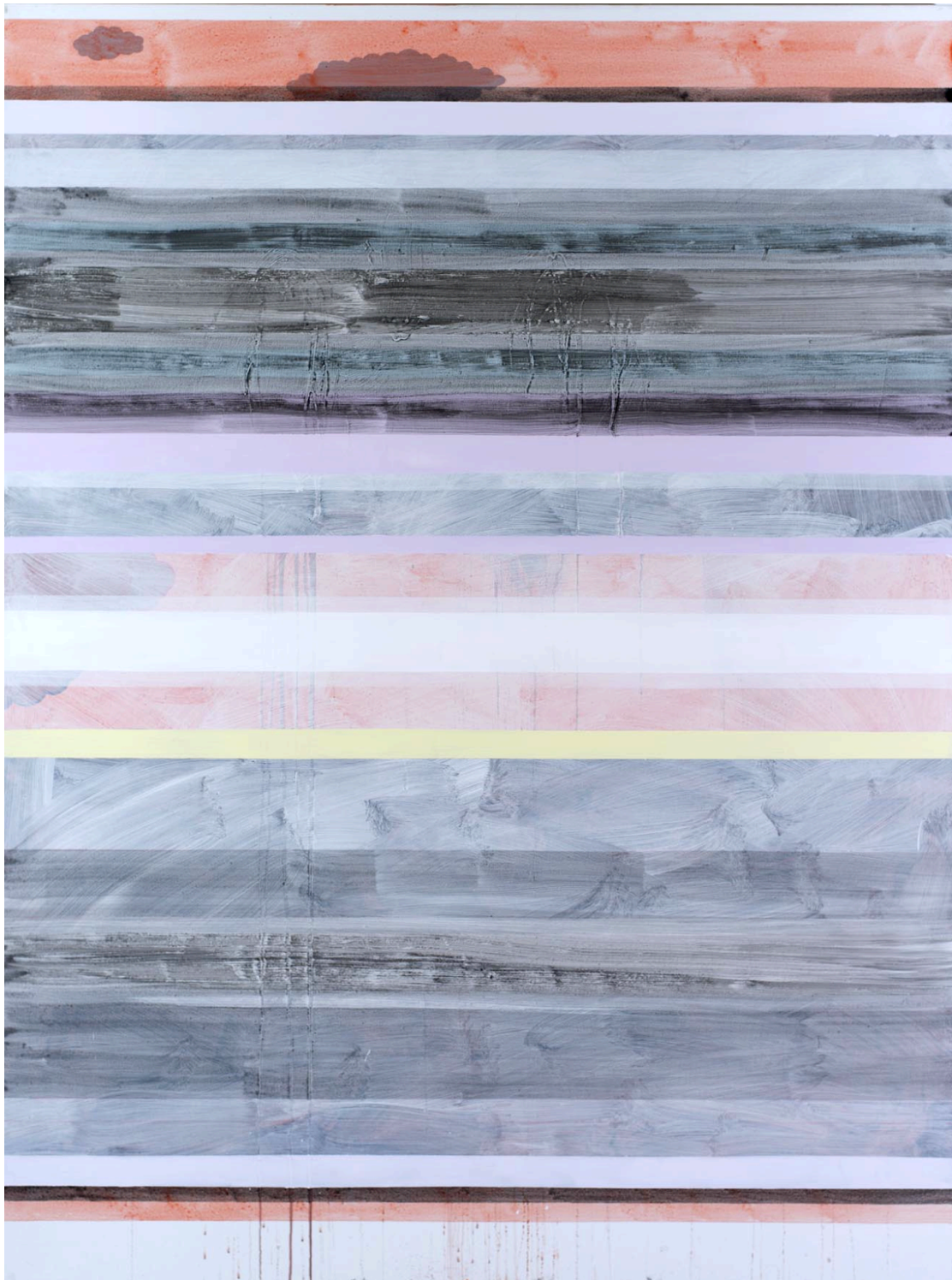


Figure 1 Affecting Interference 3, 200x150cm, acrylic on canvas, 2012 by Daniel Mafe

In preparing this exhibition each artist, Daniel Mafe a visual artist and Andrew Brown a sound artist, has had to shift their usual mode of making to accommodate the other's contribution. This was mainly done by a process of emptying whereby each was called upon to do less to the works they were contributing and to iterate the works toward a shared conception, blurring notions of individual imagination while maintaining material authorship. Emptying was necessary to enable sufficient porosity where each medium allowed the other entry to its previously gated domain. The paintings consist of a geometrically simple yet subtle catalogue of horizontal stripes. This simple visual strategy allows for a relatively non-distracting space for the sonic textures to work on the viewer's engagement with them. The sound remains both resolutely abstract, using noise-like textures, and at a low volume to allow the audience's attention to wander back and forth between aspects of the works.

Apparently simple features such as painterly stripes and sonic drones and scratchy noise provide only the most superficial structure in the work. Rather these techniques create a clearing or openness from which the potentialities inherent in the work can emerge. These potentialities arise over time as details are interrogated, and as sounds and visual relationships within the exhibition become apparent. Like many audiovisual installations, this work plays with the audiences embodied presence and movement in the exhibition space for the unfolding of experience. In particular, the directionality of the high frequency sound sources are coupled with canvases to both direct and distract attention. And low frequency sounds resonate through the floor and wall structures of the exhibition to provide a subtle visceral sensation of embodiment in the work.





Figure 2 Detail of painting and speaker from exhibition *Affecting Interference* 2012

While our work, like many 'noise' artists, hopes to provide a rich texture for audiences to engage with, it does not share the common intent to assault the senses with volume or complexity as a technique to prompt sense-making, but rather it relies on subtle and superficial simplicity to intrigue and entice. The volume is reduced to force the audience to strain towards the sound much as one leans forward to catch a whispered conversation.

### **Abstraction as experience**

This all begs the question of how noise, or materiality, as an interference leads to a sense of abstraction in this instance. We would suggest that this results from an engagement with the raw inassimilable materiality inherent within the noise/abstraction, within which lays the creative possibility to forge and embrace, as Verwoert poetically puts it, "the as-yet-unthought and almost-forgotten." It does so by teasing affordances to establish a space for a more poetic and slower paced critical engagement for the experiencing the information or data. This slowing of perception through the suspension of easy recognition runs counter to our current 'high performance' culture, and its requisite demand for speedy assimilation of content, promoting instead the poetic encounter with a potentiality or latency inherent in the nameless particularity of that which is.

French phenomenologist Michel Henry in his book on Kandinsky and abstraction, *Seeing the Invisible*, points to abstract painting's capacity to highlight that which is prior to the world. He says 'Abstract' no longer refers to what is



derived from the world at the end of a process of simplification or complication or at the end of the history of modern painting; instead '...It refers to the life that is embraced in the night of its radical subjectivity, where there is no light or world' (Henry 2009, 14). He is speaking of an experience of life which embraces itself entirely, a focus on that which is auto-affective. Life experiencing itself in its *livingness*. And the point of this is that art, by embodying or pointing to this knowledge, exists outside of itself, is porous to life and the world despite its seeming inertness, its obstinate materiality or objectness. This positions abstraction as a way of engaging materiality. Materiality's seeming aloofness is that which enables connection with that which is most vital in us, life. Thomas Carl Wall echos these ideas in *Radical Passivity* when he says,

No one *sees* the uselessness of matter. One sees material *for* this or that. Materiality *itself* harbours its own invisibility. This is its obscurity. In its uselessness, unclothed by forms, it withdraws from perception. (Wall 1999, 70)

In discussing art Blanchot has stated that, 'Art is unused, unemployed and idle matter. Art is ... the image of matter.' (In Wall 1999, 69)

From this perspective it is materiality's very uselessness that makes art possible. In other words art's appearance is enabled by matter's disappearance as matter, that is with the breakdown of its use and its subsequent naming; think of sound in poetry or colour and paint in painting. To go into this a little more, we suggest this process is emphatically demonstrated within abstract audio-visual art as much as in historical examples of abstract painting and sound art. A pertinent historical example would be where the poured and dripped gestures of Jackson Pollock render visible the materiality of paint as paint or the use of raw electronic sounds in Karlheinz Stockhausen's compositions. In their day these were very confronting actions and for many they still are, for to act in this way works strongly against art as a window to the world, as representation. Here art literally images the material. Material is rendered present in art as itself but it is still inarticulate; it is still resistant to discourse. And yet it is, in its inarticulacy, capable of generating discourse through affect.

Affect then is the first response to the demand for meaning, which then enables linkage to discourse. In this way the rupture that abstraction through materiality occasions is assimilated as criticality. We see that affect disrupts the mind of representation (language as habit, art as convention) by shattering its coherence and forcing the fragmented representations to re-orchestrate themselves around affect's impact point in discourse and so allow for a different discursive shape or critical direction to emerge.

This all works to attract attention to the ability of abstraction in the work to draw out contemplation, to invite attention and to stimulate meaning making reveals the active nature of viewing and listening; a perspective reinforced by contemporary psychology. For example, O'Regan and Noë suggest that:

Seeing... is a temporally extended pattern of activity. To see is to be skilled in this activity. Visual experience, like that of Porsche-driving, does not consist in the occurrence of "qualia" or such like. Rather, it is a kind of give-and-take between you and the environment. Moreover, we claim,

there are no states or processes in the brain that generate the experience of seeing. Brain processes participate in seeing, but none deserves to be thought of as “the locus of seeing in the brain”. Seeing is something we do, not something that happens in our brains (even though, of course, a lot goes on in the brain when we see). (O’Regan and Noë 2001, 80)

Described in this way, as a temporal and embodied activity, seeing appears quite similar to hearing. Indeed all senses, in this enactive view, share deep underlying perceptual similarities which are deliberately exploited in our audio-visual work. This further underscores the requirement for our practices to be stripped back such that the combined sensory experience, which seems more than simply summative, does not overwhelm or confuse. The use of abstraction further invites active perceptual investigation, interpretation and engagement and the compounded potentialities of the audio and visual combination present a sea of experiences to the audience.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper we have explored the use of noise and materiality as a technique of abstraction in our exhibition, *Affecting Interference*. We have also described how such abstraction might be used to create a space that not only slows down or even interrupts perception but also heightens aesthetic affect in a world of otherwise shallow engagement, one driven by increasing informational density and fidelity.

As Deleuze remarked in his book on Proust:

More important than thought there is what ‘leads to thought’ ...that what is essential is outside of thought... impressions which force us to look, encounters which force us to interpret, expressions which force us to think. (Deleuze 2000, 95)

It is interesting that in a world increasingly dominated by audio-visual media and the flow and control of information that slowing down or interrupting this access works to heighten our awareness of our senses as a whole, that is as a sensorium.

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